

A walk in the park

The Department of Conservation is charged with managing our conservation estate; the mountains, forests, waterways and wildlife that, essentially, is what our visitors come to see. With DOC's primary role one of protection it is small wonder, perhaps, that some tension exists between the bureaucracy and tourism operators. But is it as bad as some make out, and what does the future hold? KATHY OMBLER set out to find out.

"WE'D love to take you to see those rare birds/plants/wetlands/whales, or whatever, but DOC won't let us."

Let's face it, how many times has that kind of comment been repeated by walking guides or tour bus drivers or cruise skippers over the past 10 years?

The Department of Conservation's concessions and tourism manager, Gavin Walker believes we've moved on.

"There has been a growing awareness and maturity among the industry that there are some very real environmental issues and that they [tourism operators] can be part of the solution."

As a result, there has been a significant increase in operators' willingness to engage in conservation and understand DOC's role, he says. "We're both working for the same thing, after all. DOC and tourism operators seek the same result, we all want these places available in the future."

Walker is also not too fazed about operators who are critical of DOC.

"I think a lot of people in the industry get hung up about what they see

DOC not doing well. At the same time there is an awful lot we are doing that's helped the tourism industry become what it is now and that's New Zealand's biggest export earner.

"The reality is that the resource we care for and the infrastructure and facilities we provide actually underpins the New Zealand tourism industry. The marketing and imagery of New Zealand is focused on the natural landscape and environment, the whole concept of the New Zealand visitor experience is about travelling to our natural places."

The most obvious way in which DOC supports the tourism industry is through the provision (or deliberate non-provision) of facilities that enables use and enjoyment of conservation land.

The list is exhaustive: 12,800 km of tracks, 230 front country campsites, 986 back country huts, 8,000 bridges, 1,570 toilets, 2,300 km of roads, to name just some.

Then there is the plethora of information resources; the 26 visitor centres, the brochures, the maps, the interpretive signs and directional signs that guide and educate and, possibly, inspire visitors, be they domestic or international, tramping the remote ridgelines of a forest park or pottering along the West Coast's SH6 in a campervan.

Managing around one thousand multi-year recreation and tourism concessionaires is another critical and yes, at times, challenging element of DOC's tourism industry involvement.

Here, Walker concedes there is always opportunity for DOC to look carefully at what it does and to improve. He also says it's a two way thing.

"What's needed is effective, up-front communication. We're trying to move to a situation where we are working collaboratively and in partnership, so each side recognises and accepts certain responsibilities to make things work.

"That requires us to be up-front, honest and professional in how we deal with tourism operators and it requires operators doing the same. When both parties are communicating well and with honesty, there tends not to be issues."

Fundamentally, DOC is a conservation agency, says Walker. The other elements are fostering and managing use of public conservation land and resources.

"In doing this we have to ensure that we don't put conservation values at risk. It is a public resource but there is that caveat there."

Add to that caveat issues of safety and overcrowding in some hot spots and it's clear a very high wire balancing act is called for.

"There are some real challenges for the department because we don't have the ability to prevent people going into places. Instead we employ a range of mechanisms to manage the effects of an activity on the conservation values, infrastructure and social experience."

Here's where concessionaires come in.

"We can manage visitation through concessionaires. By limiting or not issuing transport concessions, for example, we can restrict the number of people taken to a certain location. We also use booking systems and facilities development to draw people to certain areas, and restrict infrastructure to discourage visitation to others.

"The fact that New Zealand, unlike most countries, does not charge entry to national parks means people can freely access these areas as, and when, they want. This certainly creates a difficult relationship with those places because it is not a transactional thing."

Assessing the applicability of a park entry fee is alluded to in the New Zealand Tourism Strategy 2015.

Walker says DOC has an open mind and looks forward to that debate. "There are pros and cons and it's about asking the question, what would we achieve and what would we lose?"

"People also suggest the option of developing new or complementary opportunities to take the pressure off peak areas. That can work in some cases but not where there is a unique set of factors. We can't develop another Tongariro Alpine Crossing or Milford Sound or glacier region, for example, so I think that's a false hope."

Nevertheless, while he says there will always be issues Walker believes people are guilty of looking at busy places as problems instead of success stories.

"For example in the early 1990s fewer than 10,000 people walked the Tongariro Alpine Crossing. This year the number was around 65,000 - that's a whole lot more people having a fantastic experience.

"If we want to work in partnership, so that tourism operators can help us achieve good quality conservation management we need to be realistic about the need for viable visitor numbers so that operators can invest in their business."

There's also the advocacy factor. "One of the key ways to understand the importance of New Zealand's unique flora and fauna is to actually get people out there to see it for themselves. If people can have an amazing experience they'll tend to develop an affinity for that place or species and are far more likely to help fight for its future.

"We recognise most operators want to do the right thing and it's about us providing the information and doing the right thing to help them conduct their business."

Looking ahead, Walker promises better support for DOC's concessionaires.

"One key thing we need to do is encourage visitors to use approved operators, so we are aiming to list all our concessionaires on the DOC website by mid 2008.

"At the moment all our walks, for example, are described on our website but if a visitor wants a guided walk there is no further information. We would much prefer that a visitor is directed to the operators who have gone through the concession process with us. Businesses can say anything on their own websites.

"At the end of the day we are serious about concessionaires and we need to support their business to give them a competitive advantage."

Kathy Ombler is a freelance writer specialising in environmental and nature tourism.



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What are the issues facing DOC?

Gripes and groans from operators about the concessions process are not uncommon. Here Gavin Walker responds to some of the most common criticisms, as gathered from concessionaires throughout New Zealand. By KATHY OMBLER.

DOC takes an overly long time to process concession applications. Can applications be turned around more promptly?

Substantial changes have been made in the past 18 months to speed up the assessment processes. The majority of applications are now processed within reasonable timeframes; 96 percent of those for one-off activities are concluded within five working days and more than 66 percent for longer term concessions within 12 weeks. Proposals that suffer delays are often due to the need to collect more information or consult with interested parties. We are always looking to refine the processes to improve the turnaround time for applicants.

The tourism industry works on long time frames and tourism operators need security of tenure so they can accept advance bookings and invest in infrastructure. DOC is reluctant to grant concessions for longer than 10 years because longer does not fit with its management planning framework. Can DOC look at this framework so that granting longer concessions is less problematic?

DOC understands the nature of the tourism sector and the desire for longer concession terms. The problem is not with the planning framework but in reconciling the range of views expressed by different stakeholders, some of whom wish to retain flexibility in future management. However, there is a willingness to investigate a move to longer terms. This issue is currently under discussion with the Ministry of Tourism and TIANZ.

The true value of a concession only occurs when the concession process is enforced. What is DOC policy on enforcement, which to date has been patchy and limited?

In recent years there has been a significant increase in compliance activity. This is showing real benefits, with far fewer operators detected without concessions compared with five years ago. The problem remains that DOC manages more than 3800 visitor locations and cannot be everywhere all of the time. We both appreciate

and investigate information passed to us by concessionaires and the public when they suspect someone is operating illegally on public conservation land.

Compliance and enforcement is essential and has obvious benefits to both the concessionaire, though preventing competition from unauthorised operators, and to conservation, as unauthorised operators might operate in a manner that damages conservation values.

The price of obtaining a concession is horrendously high for someone starting out. Why is it mandatory to have a safety plan audited by expensive consultants, who it seems have never been out of the office?

DOC staff are not experts in assessing the safety risks of an operation. This is especially challenging given the variety of activities involved. DOC therefore requires applicants to develop safety plans and have them peer reviewed by suitably qualified members of the Registered Outdoor Safety Auditors of Australasia (ROSA). This provides assurance for DOC, the concessionaire and the customer.

Individual auditors have different backgrounds and interests. I encourage concessionaires to discuss their proposal with an auditor to ensure they are the right person for their business and if not, to feel free to approach another.

Operators pay an annual environmental monitoring fee – but what is monitored, who does it, and how/when do the concessionaires get to see the results?

Without effective monitoring it is difficult to ensure that the conditions applied to concessions are appropriate or necessary for the protection of conservation values.

The annual fee is the concessionaires' contribution towards the cost of this monitoring assurance. I encourage concessionaires to ask their local DOC contact how this money is being used and for the results of information collected. This is information that concessionaires are entitled to receive and it may assist them to better manage any adverse effects resulting from their operation.

The Conservation Act does not allow for consideration of an operator's track record when considering concession applications. Should this anomaly be addressed so that responsible operators are given precedence?

This is incorrect. The Conservation Act enables any information relevant to the applicant's ability to carry out the proposed activity to be considered. This is why the applicant is asked to provide evidence of their relevant experience backed up by testimonials from people who can vouch for their proficiency in relation to the activity.

DOC has controls to manage guiding operators on the DOC estate but some operators simply drop groups off to walk a track and pick them up later. There is no control over what those groups get up to. Thus responsible operators who guide their groups are more heavily regulated and penalised by having to pay concession fees. How does DOC propose to manage this in the future?

This is a common frustration amongst concessionaires but it highlights a real opportunity to sell the added value to the customer of being accompanied by a professional guide. From the customer perspective this must mean a higher quality, safer experience. This gives the concessionaire an advantage over operators who are only permitted to provide a basic transport service.

In areas of potential over demand (e.g. Key Summit) there are moves to restrict concessionaire use, despite the level of actual use being considerably below the allocated use. What is DOC's view on the tradability or rental of the allocation between operators?

DOC has a desire to see allocated use being realised and there are options available to achieve this. There is nothing to prevent operators from having an informal arrangement, if one business has more customers than it can cater for and another has excess capacity. Also, one concessionaire could purchase another concessionaire's business to obtain a greater allocation.

DOC is also keen to see that future concession contracts include the ability for periodic review of an allocation in light of the actual level of use by the concessionaire. This would allow the reallocation of unused allocation to those capable of realizing its potential.